

# AMHERST BULLETIN

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## Time to solve Amherst's parking problem

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Amherst has been studying, constructing and agonizing over downtown parking for over six decades. Sadly, we still seem to have a problem.

Millions of dollars have been paid to consultants and spent on an inefficient parking deck but a long-term, focused strategy for parking in downtown continues to elude us. Over the many years, countless talented professionals have inventoried and analyzed the variety of parking options and come up with many logical recommendations.

Some of these have been implemented and proven successful and some have fallen by the wayside of public opinion, process, legal issues or all of the above. The time has come to boldly address the municipal parking concept and move forward with the size, location and functionality of parking that our downtown requires.

Defining how much parking we need and where it should be located has been the crux of the matter since we established a Municipal Parking District in the 1950s. Over the years, Amherst has diligently been appropriating funds to construct, reconstruct and study parking lots within the town center. Somehow though, we have never ended up with a cohesive system that appropriately manages the varied residential, retail and restaurant components within the town core.

Each unique use within the downtown area requires a certain type of parking situation. Residential uses need spaces for overnight parking. Commercial uses need spaces during daytime hours. In many instances, these can, and should, be the same spaces. The concept of shared parking is not new and is, in fact, already in our zoning bylaw. Let's use it.

And let's build more. In a new parking structure.

We spent \$5 million and 20 years building a parking “garage” that was insufficient from the day it opened. We need another one. Lucky for us, most of the work has already been done for the location where it should have been built in the first place. According to several parking feasibility studies from the 1960s and 70s, the best place for a new municipal parking structure was in what is now called the CVS lot.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, the town started the steps necessary to build a parking structure in this location. Town Meeting approved the acquisition of land, via eminent domain, and two-thirds of the area needed was purchased in 1989. By the early 1990s we had preliminary designs and cost estimates in hand.

Then what happened? No one is quite sure, but clearly there isn't a garage. However, it remains an extremely logical and viable location.

Between Town Hall, the institutions of higher learning, the Chamber and the BID, we have partnerships in place to build it. There were solid arguments for establishing a Municipal Parking District and choosing to construct a large parking structure all those years ago and they still hold true.

Relying on individual development projects for parking in downtown will never be an answer. But collectively parking can be built in the location, manner and amount that enhances downtown as a destination rather than detracting from it. New businesses will choose to locate in a downtown that offers a simple, coordinated parking system and consumers will be able to easily visit and enjoy its amenities.

An active and functional downtown provides parking for everyone in strategic locations with appropriate signs and guidance to help people find their way.

We do have a parking problem in downtown Amherst but we really aren't that far from some great solutions. Now is the time to fully embrace a holistic, town-led approach to municipal parking. It is an exciting time of redevelopment and revitalization in Amherst's center and our approach to municipal parking should match it stride for stride.

We are the place that people want to come. Let's make it as easy as possible for them.

Sarah la Cour is executive director of the Amherst Business Improvement District. Her column appears on the second Friday every other month.

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